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ABSTRACT

In the past few years, numerous states have initiated school improvement programs. These programs have included any or all of the following characteristics: (1) teacher and administrator certification and competency tests; (2) school-based planning; (3) staff development; (4) student assessment; (5) revised curricula and instructional strategies; and (6) student competency tests and revised accreditation standards. New Jersey has developed a comprehensive plan to implement a "thorough and efficient" (T&E) system in which schools are able to identify problem areas and provide remediation. Minnesota has combined two programs, Some Essential Learner Outcomes (SELOs) and Planning, Evaluation and Reporting (PER), to develop a process for curriculum planning and evaluation which addresses its specific needs. Colorado's plan has focused on accreditation requirements, accountability, school climate improvement, and Individually Guided Education (IGE). In North Carolina, eight regional service centers are used to provide technical assistance to local districts and schools. The Connecticut School Effectiveness Project is a voluntary school-site approach in which the local faculty is responsible for developing its own plans. (DC)

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Improving Schools With Limited Resources

THE ISSUE

With the real level of fiscal resources for the nation's schools unlikely to go up, education policy makers must come up with ways to improve education quality with limited and sometimes declining resources. The dollar cost of education has jumped geometrically over the past decade, but prices have leaped even higher. Public demands for quality education in the eighties cannot be met with the expensive education strategies of the seventies. New ones are needed.

The Fiscal Picture

The financial health of the education system in most states is not good. Although real resources for public elementary and secondary schools increased by 40 percent during the seventies, each year in the eighties they have declined. The outlook for the next few years is not much brighter. Except for a few of the energy-rich states, most state budgets are in poor and deteriorating condition. For fiscal 1982, 29 states are expected to end the year with general fund deficits, or balances of less than 1 percent. The nationwide fund surplus for the 50 states is estimated to be 1.5 percent; 5 percent is the normal standard. In many states, revenue intake has fallen below revenue estimates for nearly four successive quarters. Why? There are four reasons:

- First, beginning in 1978, states enacted major tax rate reductions, often indexing state income taxes to measures of inflation, and revenues went down.
- Second, 1981 changes in the federal tax structure reduced state revenues, since most state tax systems are linked to the federal structure.
- Third, cuts in federal aid programs decreased available state dollars.
- Fourth, the current recession, somewhat unexpected, deeper and longer lasting than anyone predicted, is lowering tax revenues at all levels.

The short-term outlook for education finance is grim, and those seeking improved education quality will have to find inexpensive routes.

Education Quality

In many respects, the education system in the United States is the best in the world. There are many exemplary programs in states and local school districts across the country. Payoffs from two decades of

Colorado

In Colorado, there is a balance between local responsibility for education programs and state leadership to ensure that accountability and school planning are carried out. Very little new money has been needed. School accreditation requirements and the Educational Accountability Act work together to form the basis of the state's school improvement program. In 1980, new legislation provided the state board of education with authority to accredit school districts and required all districts to comply with the state's 1971 accountability law as one condition of accreditation. The accountability law requires all districts to develop a continuing five-year plan based on local priorities for education improvement programs. In addition, each district is asked to develop a two-year plan for each school.

During 1980-81, two additional programs were added. The state department of education began the first year of a three-year pilot, the Climate Improvement Program, along with Individually Guided Education (IGE). The Climate Improvement Program is designed to improve student attitudes and achievements by improving school climates; characteristics of individual schools are assessed and programs to eliminate student alienation are developed. In the IGE program, teachers are trained in individualized instruction techniques designed to help more students master basic skills.

North Carolina

Some states avoid regulations or requirements almost entirely and rely on technical assistance from either the state education agency or regional centers to promote local improvement. For example, North Carolina uses teams from eight regional service centers to aid local districts and schools. These centers are staffed with department specialists and consultants with expertise in staff development, child nutrition, exceptional children, curriculum, vocational education and community/school relations. They hold workshops, help write grant proposals and help develop plans and budgets. A principals' institute, through the regional centers, focuses on principals' needs, time management, stress and

performance appraisal. Most of the state education agency's services are delivered through these centers — branches of the department of public instruction, not intermediate units.

The state also tests students as they move through school, and administers a competency test in grade 11 for high school graduation.

Governor James B. Hunt Jr. has made education improvement a keystone of his statewide economic development plan and the programs described above have received substantial new money as a result.

Connecticut

In Connecticut, a tradition of strong local autonomy constrains the state education agency from mandating statewide school improvements. Nevertheless, the state is promoting a broad array of efforts directed at local educational quality, such as curriculum guides, statewide proficiency exams for ninth graders, teacher development and school effectiveness projects that rely on local initiative for success.

The Connecticut School Effectiveness Project is a voluntary school-site approach using a facilitator from either the state education agency or regional education service centers. The facilities help local districts develop action plans for improving student achievement, using student assessment data and current knowledge from effective teaching research. In each school, the entire faculty is involved. They decide whether or not to participate in the project, and, if they do, they help develop the action plan. Resource persons help implement various plan components. As schools develop their own problem-solving and capacity-building abilities, facilitators' roles diminish. The goal is to produce improved student achievement by the end of the second year of action.

Other states have developed alternative approaches to school-based education improvement programs and the activities discussed above are not the only ones in those states. The fact is that many states and local school districts have begun new and exciting school improvement initiatives, all aimed at improving performance in the basic skills and revitalizing education quality in the nation.★